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Personality Characteristics of Successful Applicants to the Priesthood

Thomas G. Plante ^{1, 2, 3}, Gerdenio Manuel ¹, and Jeannette Tandez ¹

This study investigated personality characteristics of successful pastoral candidates to a major Catholic religious order. Personality measures (i.e., MMPI-2 and 16PF) were administered to 21 male applicants between 1990 and 1994 who subsequently entered into religious life. Results suggest that these clergy applicants were generally well-adjusted, socially responsible, and interpersonally sensitive. However, results also suggest a tendency for defensiveness. Coping with perceived negative impulses (i.e., anger and hostility) may also be an issue for many. Implications for future research are offered.

Recently, a great deal of media attention has focused on sexual abuse perpetrated by Roman Catholic priests as well as neoconservative and often unpopular positions of the Catholic church (e.g., celibacy, ordination of women, homosexuality, contraception use, and abortion). Frequent front-page news articles, national magazine cover stories, and feature length films about these issues are common. Catholic priests, as well as the Catholic church in general, have been

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under tremendous scrutiny. This scrutiny has also included questions concerning the character, personality, and general psychological health of priests and applicants to the priesthood. Some have suggested that priests and applicants to the priesthood often experience serious personality and psychological dysfunction (e.g., Meloy, 1986). The question of the personality and psychological health of Catholic priests is an intriguing one that has received little attention in the professional literature.

All Catholic priests cannot be universally characterized in terms of personality and psychological functioning. Like many vocations and professions, a wide variety of individuals choose to become Catholic priests and a range of personality styles and levels of psychological health are represented in the priesthood. However, a fairly small number of research studies have investigated the psychological profiles of Catholic clergy or Catholic seminary students in an effort to better understand the psychological and personality functioning of these individuals (e.g., Banks, Mooney, Mucowski, & Williams, 1984; Bier, 1948; Keddy, Erdberg, & Sammon, 1990; McCarthy, 1942; Weisgerber, 1966). More studies have examined the psychological profiles of non-Catholic clergy such as Protestant ministers (e.g., Ashbrook & Powell, 1967; Ekhardt & Goldsmith, 1984; Patrick, 1990, 1991). The vast majority of these investigations have used the MMPI to assess personality and psychological functioning and the majority of these projects were conducted prior to 1980. However, a review of these and more recent studies indicate that specific clergy personality trends based on group data have surfaced.

As part of a comprehensive review of the literature, Nauss (1973) investigated MMPI profiles of nine Protestant and two Catholic studies and found "...an amazing similarity..." (p. 84)

and a "...high degree of uniformity among MMPI results...suggest(ing) an easily identifiable pattern" (p. 89) with elevations on the K, Hy, Pd, Mf, and Ma scales and low scores on the Si scale. Nauss described the ministerial personality as being characterized by A...extroversion, reflectiveness or intuitiveness, nurturance, and co-operation, and environment ordering@ (p. 89).

Nauss further noted that Catholic seminary students tended to be more introverted than Protestants.

In a more recent investigation, Patrick (1991) administered the MMPI and the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) to male and female pastoral candidates in the United Church of Christ. Although not a Catholic clergy population, Patrick found that, similar to the findings of Nauss (1973), A... scales K, (Hy), (Pd), and (Ma) were among the five most deviated MMPI scales@ (p. 189). Furthermore, affiliation, interception, dominance, and nurturance were elevated on the EPPS measure. In a large study of Catholic clergy, Banks et al. (1984) examined 94 candidates to the Franciscan Order and found that these subjects had lower scores on the MMPI Si subscale and higher scores on the MMPI Sc subscale, suggesting that subjects experienced idiosyncratic thinking and a strong need for affiliation. Keddy et al. (1990) found elevated L scales on the MMPI, suggesting priests often maintain defensive styles. Dunn (1990) reviewed the professional literature concerning MMPI investigations with Catholic priests and noted frequent elevations on the Mf, Pt, and Sc Scales, suggesting that priests, "...tend to be more perfectionistic, worrisome, introversive, socially inept and in more extreme cases, perhaps more isolated and withdrawn" (p. 133). Meloy (1986) suggests that Catholic clergy may tend to be narcissistic.

The purpose of this study was to investigate personality characteristics of successful

pastoral candidates to the priesthood of a major religious order. Since most of the few studies in this area were conducted many years ago (prior to current Church controversies as well as prior to the significant decline in the number of men applying to the priesthood and the publication of the new version of the MMPI), the current study sought to update previous research. Personality measures (i.e., MMPI-2 and 16PF) were administered to 21 male applicants between 1990 and 1994 who subsequently and successfully entered religious life. An examination of profiles relative to national norms were conducted to investigate the general psychological and personality health of these men.

METHODS

Subjects

Twenty-one successful male applicants to the priesthood of a major Catholic religious order were utilized as research subjects (Mean age = 29.00, SD = 8.16).

Measurements

The MMPI-2 (Hathaway & McKinley, 1989) is the best known and researched general personality questionnaire available. It consists of 567 true-false questions that comprise 3 validity scales, 10 basic clinical scales, and over 30 supplementary and additional subscales. The newest edition (Hathaway & McKinley, 1989) is normed on 1980 U.S. Census figures. The test is considered highly reliable and valid.

The 16PF (Cattell, Cattell, & Cattell, 1993) is a well-known and researched personality questionnaire that consisted of 185 multiple-choice test items comprising 16 primary personality factor scales. Internal consistency reliabilities average about .74 with test-retest reliabilities averaging about .80 for two-week intervals and about .70 for two-month intervals. The newest

edition (fifth edition) is normed on 1990 U.S. Census figures.

Procedure

The applicants completed the MMPI-2 and 16PF personality testing as well as a one hour clinical interview prior to admission to the priesthood between 1990 and 1994. The psychological evaluation was conducted as one of the final stages of the application and discernment process prior to admission. All test scores were converted to standard scores and entered onto an IBM (Pentium-90) computer using SYSTAT for Windows.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for MMPI-2 scales and 16PF scores are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 About Here]

MMPI-2 Results

Standardized T-scores from the subjects were compared to national norms using mean T-scores of 50 and standard deviations of 10 (Hathaway & McKinley, 1989). A review of Table 1 indicates a variety of significant MMPI-2 findings when compared to these national norms. First, the subjects tend to be defensive with significant elevations on the MMPI-2 L ($\underline{M} = 57.24$, $\underline{SD} = 8.57$; $p < .001$), K ($\underline{M} = 60.48$, $\underline{SD} = 9.03$, $p < .001$), and R scales ($\underline{M} = 57.71$, $\underline{SD} = 8.26$) and low scores on the F scale ($\underline{M} = 43.91$, $\underline{SD} = 4.81$, $p < .001$). Second, subjects tend to experience many traditional feminine interests with elevations on the MF ($\underline{M} = 58.86$, $\underline{SD} = 6.89$, $p < .001$) and GF scales ($\underline{M} = 60.30$, $\underline{SD} = 11.39$, $p < .001$). Third, subjects tend to score high on overcontrolled hostility ($\underline{M} = 60.71$, $\underline{SD} = 8.06$, $p < .001$). Fourth, subjects tend to score high on social responsibility (Scale RE: $\underline{M} = 57.52$, $\underline{SD} = 9.70$, $p < .01$). Finally, subjects tend to show

generally good adjustment with significantly low scores on a wide variety of clinical measures as compared to national norms such as anxiety (Scale A: $\underline{M} = 43.48$, $\underline{SD} = 6.60$, $p < .001$ and Scale ANX: $\underline{M} = 44.95$, $\underline{SD} = 8.02$, $p < .01$) depression (Scale DEP: $\underline{M} = 43.86$, $\underline{SD} = 7.65$, $p < .01$), anger (Scale ANG: $\underline{M} = 41.76$, $\underline{SD} = 6.40$, $p < .001$), antisocial behavior (Scale ASP: $\underline{M} = 39.86$, $\underline{SD} = 6.34$, $p < .001$), Type A behavior (Scale TPA: $\underline{M} = 39.43$, $\underline{SD} = 6.06$, $p < .001$), and obsessions (Scale OBS: $\underline{M} = 42.57$, $\underline{SD} = 7.79$, $p < .001$). Composite MMPI-2 profiles can be found in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

[Insert Figures 1, 2, and 3 About Here]

16PF Results

Sten scores from the subjects were compared to national norms using mean sten scores of 5.5 and standard deviations of 3 (Cattell, Cattell, & Cattell, 1993). A review of Table 2 indicates a variety of significant 16PF findings when compared to these national norms. First, subjects tend to be bright and imaginative (Scale B: $\underline{M} = 8.06$, $\underline{SD} = 1.73$, $p < .001$; Scale M: $\underline{M} = 6.50$, $\underline{SD} = 1.92$, $p < .05$). Second, subjects tend to be sensitive (Scale I: $\underline{M} = 8.50$, $\underline{SD} = 1.62$, $p < .001$), and emotionally stable and trusting (Scale C: $\underline{M} = 7.28$, $\underline{SD} = 1.74$, $p < .001$; Scale L: $\underline{M} = 4.06$, $\underline{SD} = 1.80$, $p < .01$). Third, subjects tend to be forthright and self-assured (Scale N: $\underline{M} = 6.11$, $\underline{SD} = 1.18$, $p < .05$; Scale O: $\underline{M} = 4.17$, $\underline{SD} = 1.79$, $p < .01$). A composite 16PF profile can be found in Figure 4.

[Insert Figure 4 About Here]

DISCUSSION

Results from this study suggest that successful applicants to the priesthood, represented by the sample of applicants in this investigation, are generally well-adjusted individuals.

Findings suggest that these successful applicants are bright, socially responsible, emotionally stable, and interpersonally sensitive. Results also suggest that they tend to maintain defensive (especially repressive) styles and may be especially concerned with controlling hostile impulses.

Relative to many previous studies, the present results represent a more positive picture of Catholic clergy applicants. Unlike previous studies, the current investigation did not reveal, for example, elevations on the Pd, Ma, or Sc Scales of the MMPI. Other than defensiveness and overcontrolled hostility, the composite profile of these subjects appear well-adjusted. It is important to mention that most previous research used the original version of the MMPI while the current study utilized the new MMPI-2.

A variety of methodological issues suggest that these results must be viewed with caution. First, this study utilized a small number of successful applicants from one religious order without the benefits of using a variety of potential control groups (e.g., other religious orders, non-clergy, non-Catholic clergy). Therefore, conclusions concerning the personality and psychological functioning of this group could be associated with a variety of factors (e.g., education, social class, screening process prior to the psychological evaluation) in addition to their intentions of entering the priesthood. Second, a large number of analyses were conducted given the small sample size which increases the chance of Type I statistical errors. Finally, the defensive pattern that surfaced with this sample could also be an artifact of the testing situation. All of the subjects completed psychological testing as part of the application procedure to enter the religious order. Therefore, they were likely wanting to present a highly favorable view of themselves.

Overall, results at least suggest that successful applicants to the priesthood and to this

religious order were generally well-adjusted. Results also suggest that defensiveness (especially repression) and coping with perceived negative impulses (such as anger and hostility) may be an issue for some. Further research regarding these issues is needed to better understand the personality and psychological functioning of Catholic clergy. Future research should utilize larger sample sizes and control conditions to further understand the psychological and personality functioning of clergy. During these challenging times for Catholic priests and the Catholic church, further research is especially needed to assist both the Church and the general population in the hopes of developing better screening and selection measures for Catholic clergy.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations for MMPI-2 scores among successful Catholic clergy applicants

| Validity Measures | Means | Standard Deviations |
|-------------------|-------|---------------------|
| L | 57.24 | (8.57)** ^ |
| F | 43.91 | (4.81)** |
| K | 60.48 | (9.03)** ^ |
| Clinical Scales | | |
| Hs | 52.33 | (8.24) |
| D | 50.95 | (9.23) |
| Hy | 53.57 | (7.21)* ^ |
| Pd | 53.10 | (8.40) |
| Mf | 58.86 | (6.89)** ^ |
| Pa | 51.05 | (7.35) |
| Pt | 51.05 | (12.19) |
| Sc | 52.43 | (6.56) |
| Ma | 49.43 | (8.13) |
| Si | 46.00 | (8.95) |

Table 1, continued

Supplementary Scales

| | | |
|-------|-------|-------------|
| A | 43.48 | (6.60)** |
| R | 57.71 | (8.26)** ^ |
| Es | 51.71 | (8.93) |
| Mac-R | 40.86 | (5.38)** |
| OH | 60.71 | (8.06)** ^ |
| Do | 52.95 | (6.81) |
| Re | 57.52 | (9.70)** ^ |
| Mt | 43.95 | (8.45)** |
| GM | 47.55 | (9.89) |
| GF | 60.30 | (11.39)** ^ |
| PK | 43.71 | (6.60)** |
| PS | 44.05 | (6.56)** |
| Si1 | 47.00 | (8.33) |
| Si2 | 52.38 | (9.84) |
| Si3 | 41.91 | (6.88)** |
| Fb | 44.10 | (3.26)** |

Table 1, continued

Content Scales

| | | |
|-----|-------|----------|
| ANX | 44.95 | (8.02)** |
| FRS | 46.71 | (9.33) |
| OBS | 42.57 | (7.79)** |
| DEP | 43.86 | (7.65)** |
| HEA | 44.95 | (8.24)* |
| BIZ | 49.62 | (8.48) |
| ANG | 41.76 | (6.40)** |
| CYN | 41.19 | (6.00)** |
| ASP | 39.86 | (6.34)** |
| TPA | 39.43 | (6.06)** |
| LSE | 44.29 | (7.73)** |
| SOD | 49.10 | (9.93) |
| FAM | 47.38 | (8.76) |
| WRK | 44.81 | (10.28)* |
| TRT | 43.00 | (7.31)** |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

^ significant scale elevations

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for 16PF Scores among successful Catholic clergy applicants

| Factors | Means | Standard Deviations |
|---------|-------|---------------------|
| A | 5.83 | (1.47) |
| B | 8.06 | (1.73)** |
| C | 7.28 | (1.74)** |
| E | 5.72 | (1.97) |
| F | 4.83 | (1.72) |
| G | 5.83 | (1.43) |
| H | 5.94 | (1.51) |
| I | 8.50 | (1.62)** |
| L | 4.06 | (1.80)** |
| M | 6.50 | (1.92)* |
| N | 6.11 | (1.83)* |
| O | 4.17 | (1.79)** |
| Q1 | 5.17 | (2.41) |
| Q2 | 6.61 | (1.65) |
| Q3 | 6.11 | (1.57) |
| Q4 | 5.00 | (2.09) |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$